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ABSTRACT

A review of the various grammatical traditions from traditional grammar through structural linguistics to transformational grammar points out that traditional and transformational grammar are neither mutually exclusive nor entirely contradictory. Implications drawn from modern inquiry include the necessity for reading and writing teachers to guide students in their search for the meaning that underlies linguistic surface expression rather than to demand that students learn the rules that regulate those expressions. Teachers need a consistent philosophy of meaning and an understanding of its expression through language to produce good writers and an effective program of learning. (AEA)

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TEACHING GRAMMAR AND THE COMMUNICATIONS SKILLS

Elizabeth Lyman

The grammatical tradition

The modern grammatical tradition has progressed from what we call traditional grammar through structural linguistics to transformational grammar. A brief look at the theories behind these grammars will point out that traditional grammar and transformational grammar are neither mutually exclusive nor entirely contradictory. Scholars and scientists of the past grappled with the relationships between meaning and expression, the natural bases for categories of words, the origins of extant systems of expression, and linguistic universals. Today, these are still the concerns of grammarians.

In the mid-1780's, an erstwhile Episcopalian priest, language philosopher, and traitor to the British Crown named John Horne Tooke (16) wrote The Diversions of Purley, in which he rightly asserted that while grammar was the first subject taught, it was often the last understood. He felt that the practical grammars being used in the schools were made up of rules without reasons (a modern charge against traditional grammars) and that philosophical grammars were made up of unintelligible reasons and ridiculous distinctions (a modern charge against transformational grammar.) To explain this, he said that grammarians confused themselves because they assumed words to signify

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things. His position, and John Locke's, was that words signify ideas in the mind. Carrying this concept further, Tooke delineated only two categories: noun(ness) and verb(ness). All others are abbreviations for other words created for speed and facility of communication. Tooke is important to our study because he formulated his theory of language against the background of Locke's psychology: he presumed a fundamental relationship between psychology and linguistics. He, in fact, foreshadowed psycholinguistics, but this aspect of his grammar was overwhelmed by his genius for etymology.

There is a paradox in American education regarding language philosophy: while Noah Webster (17) based his grammar on The Diversions of Purley and praised John Horne Tooke at every opportunity for his insights, he is the one to "blame" for American prescriptive grammars. Webster feared national instability after the American Revolution. A true patriot, he held British English in disdain and determined to lead the new nation to its own Standard language, a language superior to British English. To this end, he worked diligently; his name became synonymous with language propriety and authority.

I hear echoes of Noah Webster today. Consider the following two quotes from a 1978 ETS publication:

> Not merely a "prestige dialect," Standard English is a highly practical set of conventions about the use of language that most educated people share. (1:5)

and

> Good, experienced writers can write almost automatically in a way others can understand readily because they have trained themselves to think clearly, using the conventions of Standard English. (1:5)

ETS has succinctly summarized the traditional philosophy: if the writer is to exactly present his meaning, he is to employ accepted forms and patterns in his attempt to elicit a standard understanding in the reader.

In the late 1920's, Bloomfield (2), dissatisfied with the traditional grammars on the grounds that they were founded on language intuition, proposed the use of axiomatic methods so adequate to the study of mathematics. Unfortunately, he also committed himself to the Behaviorist model of Stimulus-Response, thereby stifling the concept of linguistic meaning and restricting language study to the observable phenomena of phonology and morphology. Bloomfield's influence is still strong today in the reading materials bearing "linguistic" labels, but as Olsen (15) has pointed out, these are woefully inadequate because they are not based on the structure of meaning. The "Nan can fan Dan" variety of reading instruction sabotages a reader's search for a message.

By 1946, Zellig Harris (9) had begun an extension of the research on and descriptions of phonology to syntax. He presented the notion of the transformation, a notion revised and refined by his student and collaborator, Noam Chomsky. Chomsky (4) conceives the transformation as a device which registers the intuitions of native speakers and writers concerning particle movement behavior in English: every surface production proceeds from a deep structure of meaning, following the course dictated by some rule, or transformation. Thus, according to the transformational model, criminally oversimplified

here, we see the writing-reading communication process as:

from	through	to
Writer's deep structure (meaning)	surface structure, which is the combination of orthographs, syntactically arranged according to an intuitive grammaticalness	Reader's deep structure (meaning)

As reading teachers, we must understand the relative differences between the productive mind and the receptive mind, tremendous discrepancies that cannot be bridged at the surface level alone. Locke's concept of words hinted at those discrepancies. Then when Horne Tooke added the abbreviations of words concept, he indicated that words are as displaced from their ideas as ideas are from real objects and actions. Webster supplied the Standard to facilitate understanding.

Transformational grammarians, on the other hand, assume the Standard to be carried through intuition of what is and is not grammatical; the Standard is really unnecessary for clarity and precision. The whole of the productive communication act goes through intuition of grammaticalness to involve the whole of the receptive communication act. The whole of the act encompasses a person's knowledge, experience, deep meaning, linguistic competence, linguistic style, linguistic context, and linguistic surface expression.

Implications of modern inquiry

From either the traditional or the transformational grammatical perspective, reading and writing teachers can lead students in their search for the structure of meaning. I have taken the following principles from extensive research on the role of grammar in language instruction to support this claim.

Goodman (7) identifies three different networks of cues that provide the language information utilized in deriving meaning from written language: cues within words, cues within the flow of language (or grammar), and cues within the reader.

Durr (6) concludes both that readers profit from instruction for specific purposes and that those who understand grammatical structure are better readers than those who do not.

Y. Goodman and Greene (8) point out that complex relationships are learned by readers through exposure to the precise relationships between clauses.

Marshall (13) observes that some materials specially edited for poor readers are really harder to comprehend because they have had the structural representations of relationships removed to lower the readability. Thus, teachers must select material carefully.

Larkin (10) posits the idea that surface structures must be unpacked by the reader to reveal their deep logical content.

Minkoff and Katz (14) call for the teaching of a large passive grammar, referring to that range of surface syntactic constructions

that the reader seldom or never uses but has learned to respond to.

Bram (3) reports that skill at manipulating sentence patterns and organization are the most significant influences on the readability of scientific prose.

Linn (11) concludes that the time-consuming stress by teachers upon terminology and dissection of the language, from whatever philosophical perspective, prevents practice of simple but essential procedures that students must learn before they can write effectively.

Lunsford (12) finds that all language skills are related and that gains in reading and writing parallel each other: as syntactic maturity increases, so does the ability to draw inferences and make logical connections.

Finally, Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg (5) find that their students trained in sentence-combining exercises increased their syntactic maturity, bridging one-third of the distance originally separating their syntactic measure from that of professional writers.

Many communications skills teachers, their minds boggled by the options open to them in grammar instruction, have put the situation on "Hold" and are not dealing with it at all. Others are taking a stand based on erroneous premises. The fact is that a rule is a rule, whether it comes from Webster or Chomsky or anyone else, and rules are not what students need to learn.

What is important to the student is the search for the meaning underlying surface expressions. Teachers can show students how to investigate the author's structure of meaning, and they can do this

without teaching rules and terminology, in much the same way that I can drive a car without knowing what or where a distributor wire is. Further, reading teachers can effect better comprehension from either the traditional or the transformational perspective. However, those teachers require a consistent understanding of meaning and its expression. And there's the rub: reading teachers require a philosophy of grammar and a knowledge of that grammar's nuts and bolts. Reading students, on the other hand, require only the practical ability to manipulate their language.

The same can be said of writing teachers and students. Throughout the long, hot Austin summer of 1978, my research led me to the conclusions that good writers write a great deal, and they can manipulate sentences in their search for precision. Their teachers, however, need much more knowledge: a consistent philosophy of meaning and an understanding of its expression through language. Only by such an understanding can a writing teacher structure a consistent, effective program of learning.

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